READ AND COLOUR RIVER STORIES

The story of Brahmaputra

written by **Priya Krishnan**
illustrated by **Uma Krishnaswamy**

SKM-1154

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THE STORY OF
BRAHMAPUTRA

written by PRIYA KRISHNAN
illustrated by UMA KRISHNASWAMY

Tulika

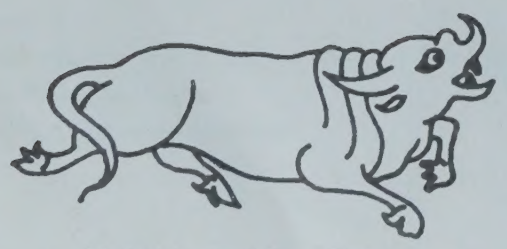
Rivers water the land and bring in fresh soil to grow crops year after year. So a river is usually seen as a mother who nourishes and cares, like Ma Ganga or Narmada Mata.

But Brahmaputra, 'son of Brahma', is one of few rivers to be thought of as male. This is perhaps because it seems to move with such force and power as it sweeps through three lands — Tibet, India and Bangladesh — and shapes the lives of people there.

This long and mighty river travels about 3,000 km from the Himalaya mountains to merge with the Bay of Bengal. It takes on a new name and a different personality every now and then, and not everyone thinks it is a 'man'!

The Idu Mishmis of Arunachal Pradesh believe that it is the sister of the sun. The story goes that unlike Sun who was free to roam the skies, the river, his sister, was trapped in a great lake called Nimtubram at one end of the world. At the other end, people and animals were dying of thirst. One day, from the thirsty land, Worm crawled to Nimtubram for water. It made a little hole, through which drops of water trickled out. Then Wild Cat wanted water. As it wriggled through, the hole got bigger . . . and bigger . . . and the river escaped!

It tumbled happily through the mountains and down to the plains of Assam. There, the Bodos, a tribal people, call it Bhullung Buthur, which means 'great river of bubbling waters'.



Mythical animal from Tibet

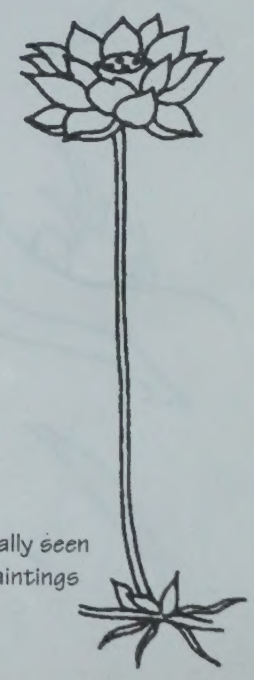
A Tibetan thangka painting

These bubbling waters come from a land of towering, ice-covered mountains, vast stretches of sand and rushing mountain streams. This is Tibet, called 'Roof of the World' because it is the highest plateau on earth, and looks like its flat rooftop!

Here the river is Tsangpo, the 'great river'. Guarded on three sides by forbidding mountain ranges, Tibet is a little difficult to reach. So for a long time explorers couldn't find the exact source of the river. We know now that it is born between sheets of ice, up in a glacier called Chemayungdung, in southwest Tibet.

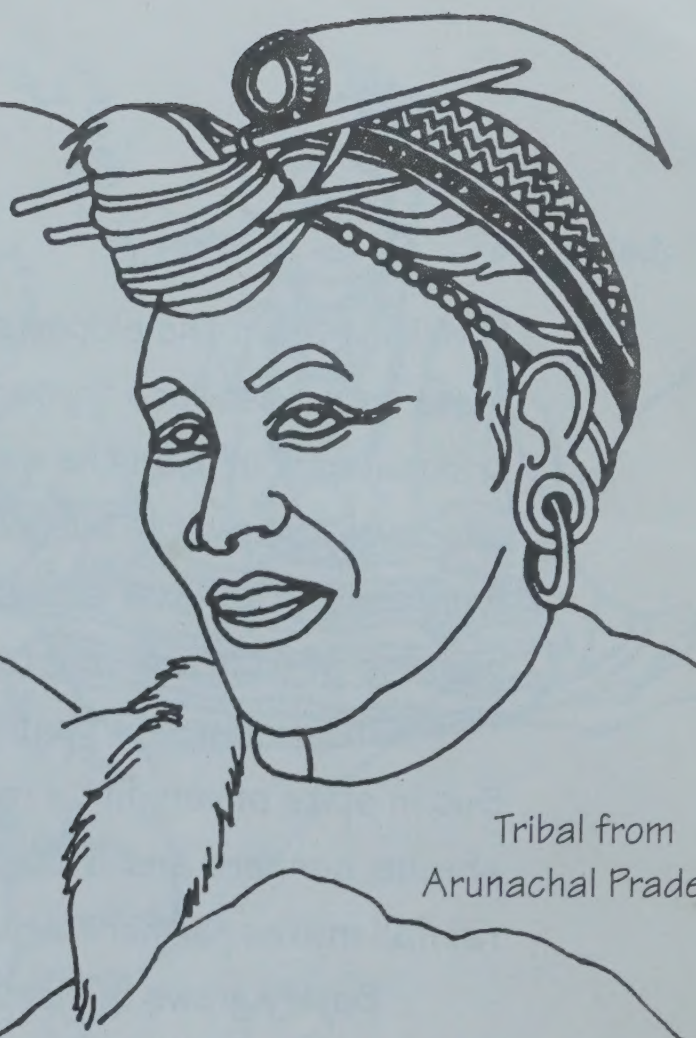
No one was even sure if Tsangpo and Brahmaputra were the same river. So little was known that many legends grew around it. One said that it gushed out of the mouth of a horse — more probably, it was a gorge shaped like a horse's mouth! Another spoke of a hidden gorge from which a gigantic waterfall crashed down on the river.

But did the gorge and falls really exist? The Monpas, a local tribe of hunters, knew the area well but were not very friendly with outsiders. They believed that these regions were sacred and wanted them to be left undisturbed. Finally, in the early 20th century, they guided a team from the National Geographic Society to this amazing waterfall. It thunders down from a height of over 30 m and is perhaps the largest on any Himalayan river. It was given the name Hidden Falls. The explorers also learnt that Tsangpo was indeed Brahmaputra.



Blue lotus, usually seen in Buddhist paintings

Abor tribesman



Tribal from
Arunachal Pradesh

Great Pied Hornbill
– black body, white
tail with black band

Monpa woman

Mishmi tribesman

Trickling down the slopes of the Himalayas, Tsangpo runs east for quite some distance through Tibet. The deep blue waters of many tributaries join it on the way. Even at a height of over 3,500 m above sea-level, the river is busy. Coracles, little boats made of yakhide and bamboo, sail and bob along the water. They carry sacks of grain, baskets of fruit and vegetables, and sometimes even a bicycle!

The mountains that surround Tibet block rain-bearing clouds. But in spite of very little rain, the Tsangpo valley is green with grass, shrubs, conifers and fruit trees of apple, pear, peach and apricot. Poor rainfall makes farmers depend on the river's waters.

Barley grows in plenty and is the 'gold' of Tibet. The people here believe it is a gift from the divine monkey, Trehu. Gyapra flowers spring up in bright red patches. From the seeds of this flower comes a flour that is made into a sweet paste, a local favourite. To make sure that all their crops are blessed by the gods and spirits who take care of their land, they celebrate Hongkor, a harvest festival.

The dzo, a cross between a cow and a yak, is an animal precious to Tibetans. It carries heavy loads, ploughs their land and gives them rich milk, curd and creamy butter. The butter mixed with ground barley in tea, makes tsampa, their everyday food. The hair of the dzo is used for warm clothing, and when Tibetans are in trouble, they blow the dzo horn to call out for help!

Buddhist mask

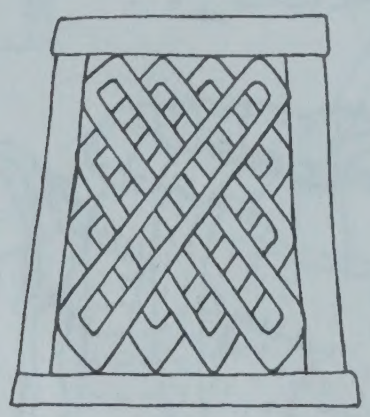
Tibetan lady
Lhasa Apso
Bags of barley

Tsangpo flows past the towns of Xigatsé and Tsedang, then suddenly climbs north. It curves in a great loop around a majestic mountain, the Namche Barwa. Close by is another mountain, Gyala Pelri. The gorges of these mountains are covered with lush evergreen rain forests. Lianas and ferns creep and climb amidst hundreds of other kinds of plants which spread like a thick green carpet on the ground.

The river pierces its way through these mountains, gushing down as rapids and cascades. It now turns southwest to enter Arunachal Pradesh in India, where it is called Siang or Dihong.

Tribal groups, such as the Mishmi and Gallong, live in the thickly forested hills along the river. Since these people live so close to nature, they fear and respect it. They believe that spirits live in the water, the rocks, the trees and the earth — and that, if angry, they can create floods, earthquakes and diseases to punish them. So they pray to these spirits to keep them happy. They also worship Earth-mother and a god they call Sun-moon.

These tribes built many of the old wooden bridges that swing across the river here. Though roughly made, building them needed skill and a never-say-die attitude — the same brave spirit that made them want to look for a way to cross this wild and turbulent river.



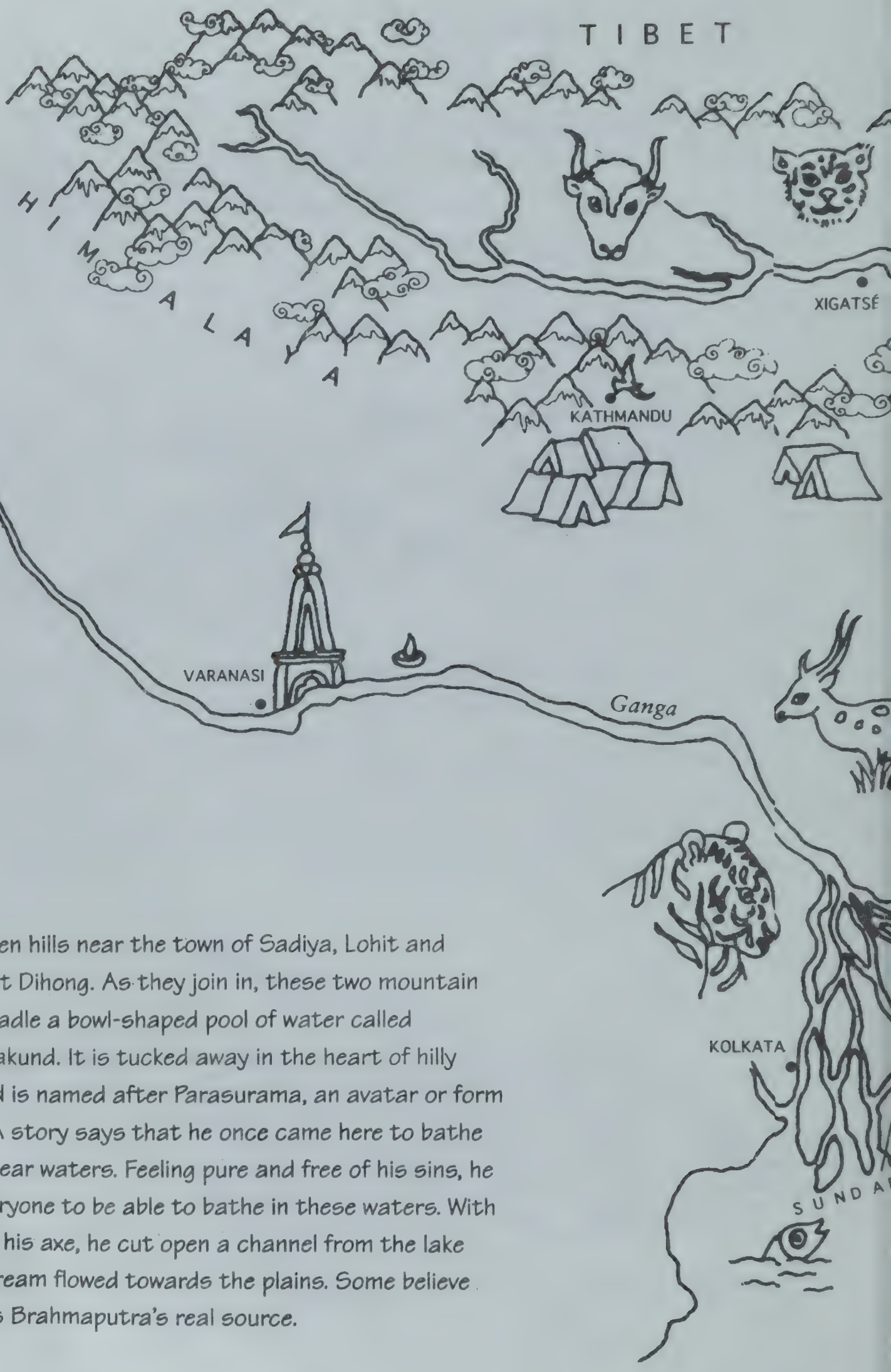
Tibetan painted window

Dzo

Barilius Bola

'Blind' River Dolphin

Gharial



In the green hills near the town of Sadiya, Lohit and Dibang meet Dihong. As they join in, these two mountain streams cradle a bowl-shaped pool of water called Parasuramakund. It is tucked away in the heart of hilly forests and is named after Parasurama, an avatar or form of Vishnu. A story says that he once came here to bathe in Lohit's clear waters. Feeling pure and free of his sins, he wanted everyone to be able to bathe in these waters. With one blow of his axe, he cut open a channel from the lake and the stream flowed towards the plains. Some believe that this is Brahmaputra's real source.

Siang or Dihong now cascades as rapids out of Arunachal Pradesh and enters the dense jungles in the north of Assam. Many streams join in on the way and it keeps growing in size till it flows, broad and mighty, through the plains as Brahmaputra.

Dotting Brahmaputra, are more than a thousand chars, or river islands. The people who live on them are nomads who wander from one island to another. They use bhoors, rafts made of banana stem, to move through the water channels that criss-cross the chars.

These islands are formed when it rains very, very heavily during the monsoons. At this time the river is at its angriest. Streams joining in swell it with water. They also bring silt down from the hills, which piles up as sandbanks or mounds to become chars. Travellers on the river find that close to Majuli, the world's largest river island, Brahmaputra suddenly calms down, and flows peacefully by.

The people living on the chars never complain about the heavy rain because the silt that comes down enriches the soil. Since these river islands appear and disappear with the change of seasons, any extra land that nature gives them to farm is welcome. Bhetki, pabda, rui, mrigel and a lot of other fish swarm in the waters around. They provide extra earnings for the people there, and also make their mealtimes more interesting!

Sacred stones with Buddhist chant

Assamese tribal

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Sarus Crane

Buffalo fight on Magh Bihu, a festival of Assam

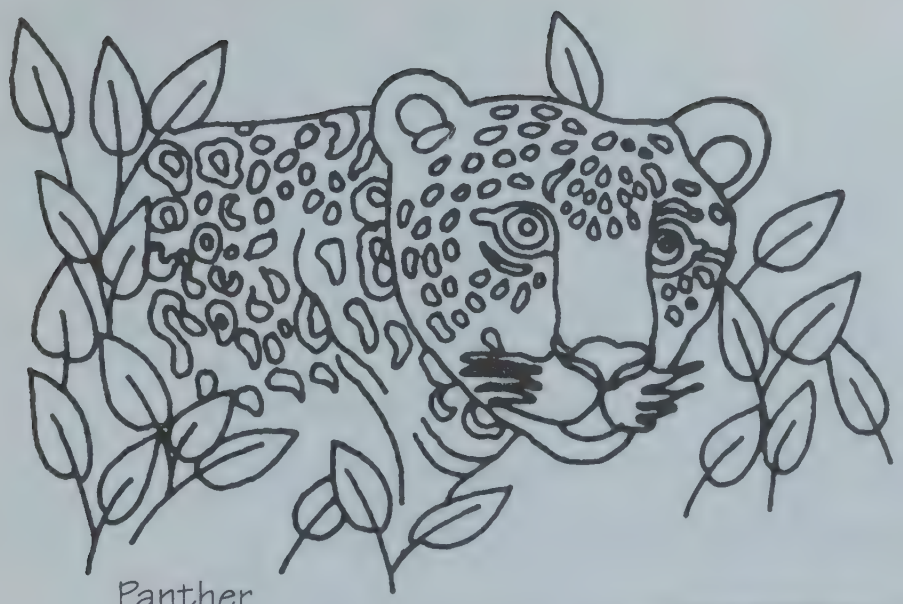
The banks of the Brahmaputra in Assam are some of the wettest parts in the world. In the early 19th century, a Scotsman named Robert Bruce came here and discovered that the Shingpo tribe grew a wild plant. They ate its leaves with garlic and, sometimes, would also use these leaves to brew an interesting hot drink — tea!

A few years later, with the help of the Shingpos, the British cleared the jungle and laid out proper tea plantations. In 1838, a steamer set sail for London carrying the first bags of tea from here. Since then the world has savoured the flavour of Assam tea.

The people of Assam are a mix of races which came from Mongolia, Tibet, Thailand and the northwest. The hills here are wild and beautiful, full of forests through which wanders Assam's most famous animal, the one-horned rhino. Now extinct in other parts of the world, these rhinos are protected in the Kaziranga National Park near Guwahati. The park also has elephants, tigers, leopards, wild buffalo and deer, almost hidden in the tall 'elephant grass' that grows there.

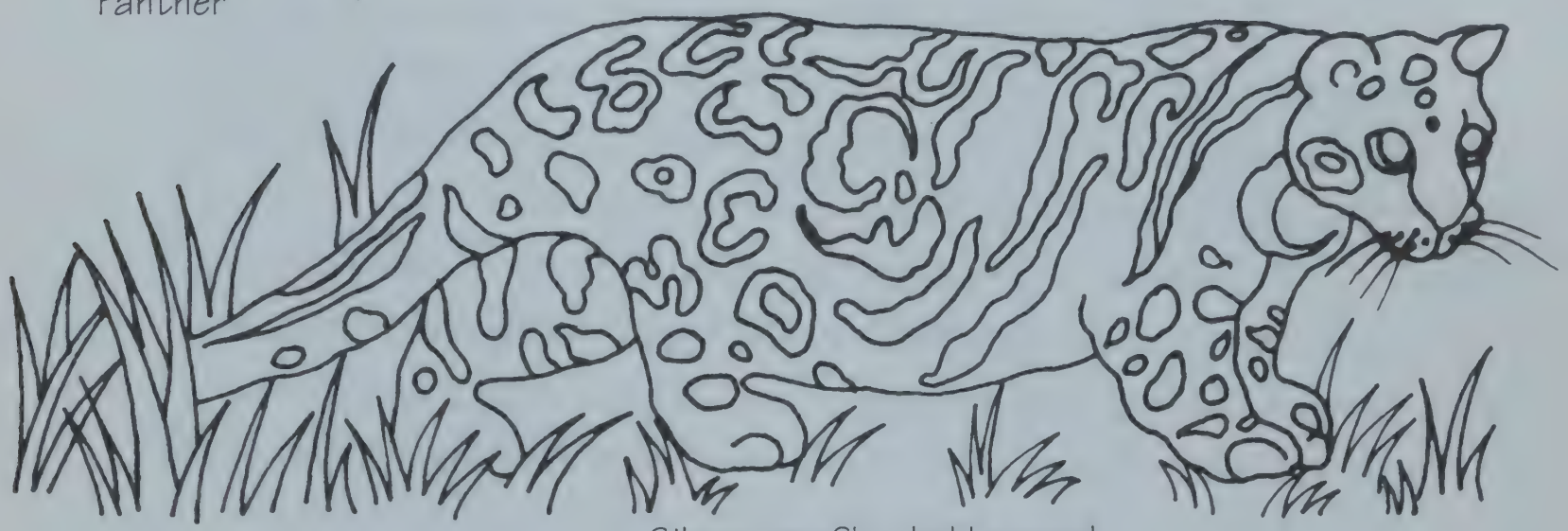
Assam is known for its lustrous silks — the golden muga, white paat and the eri — and weaving is a traditional occupation. Local craftsmen make all sorts of baskets, furniture and other fascinating objects out of the cane and bamboo from the forests around them.

Pink Cattleya orchid

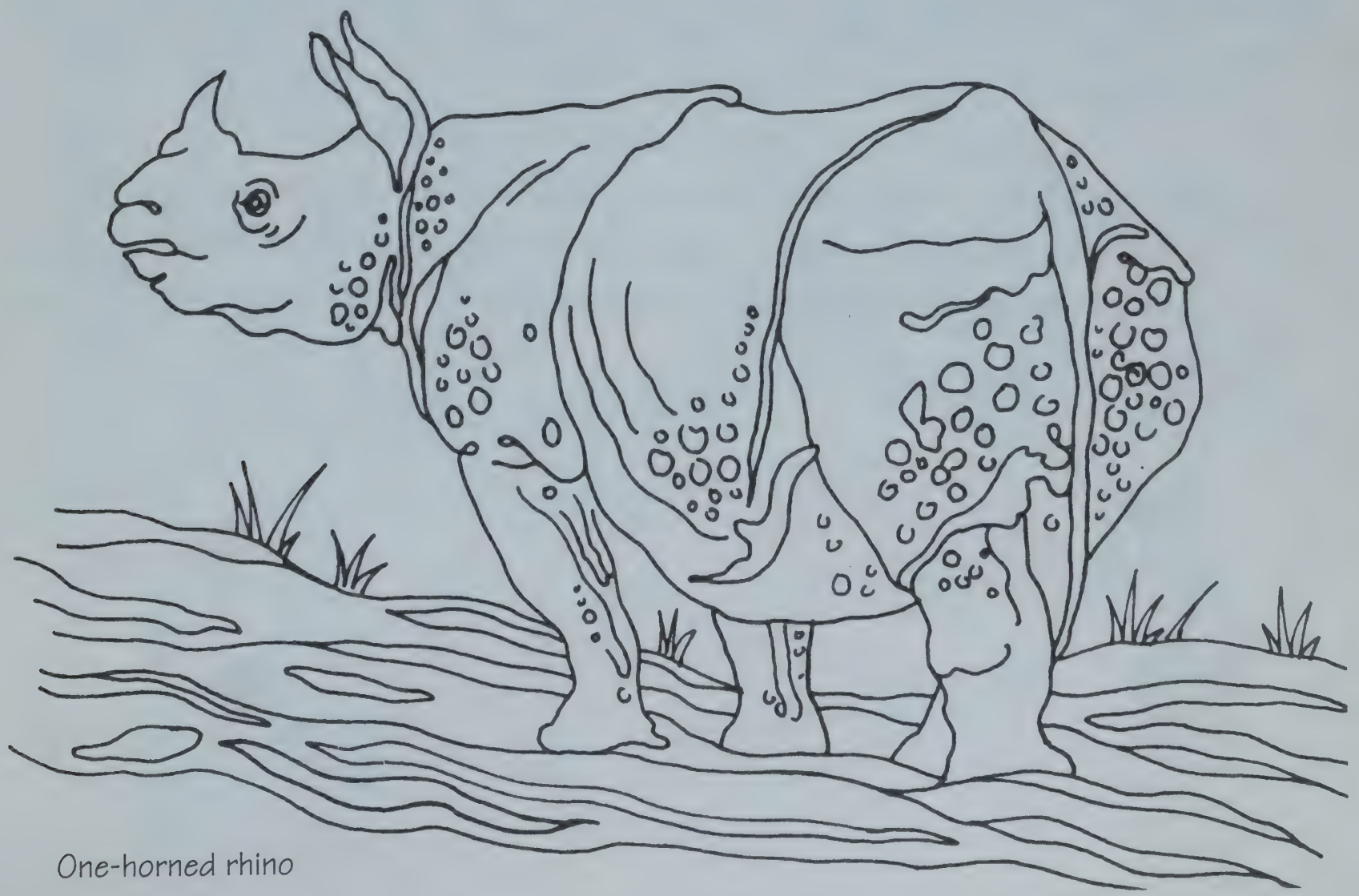


Panther

Nayan – Tibetan wild sheep



Silver-grey Clouded Leopard



One-horned rhino

Brahmaputra swerves south around the foot of the Garo Hills, and past Dhuburi town, flows straight down into the plains of Bangladesh. Joined by the river Tista, it is called Jamuna. But this is not the same as the other Jamuna, or Yamuna, that joins Ganga at Allahabad.

When the rains come pelting down in the monsoons, Jamuna rises fast and furious. The heavy silt that the rushing waters bring, blocks its passage and forces it to find new routes. People have had to leave prosperous towns along the river because of this.

At one time, large steamers used to go up and down the river carrying jute, timber, tea and rice. But again, silting and changes in Jamuna's course gradually made travel difficult. Today a few boats can be seen carrying raw materials and timber. This wood comes from forests that are being chopped to plant tea and rubber, to set up factories and to drill the earth for oil. Apart from causing floods, the disappearing forests take with them many plant and animal species — unfortunately, never to return.

In a land of so much water, the majhi, or boatmen, are a common sight. They know the waterways well, avoid sandbanks and watch the changing currents. Singing their lilting bhatiali songs, they make a living by ferrying passengers skilfully up and down the river.

Bamboo plants

Coconut trees, paddy fields and boats on the river in Bangladesh

Almost in the centre of Bangladesh, Jamuna widens as it merges with another big river, Ganga, flowing in from the west and with Meghna from the east. It changes name for the last time and becomes Padma, the 'lotus flower', whose petals now flow into the sea to form the world's largest estuary.

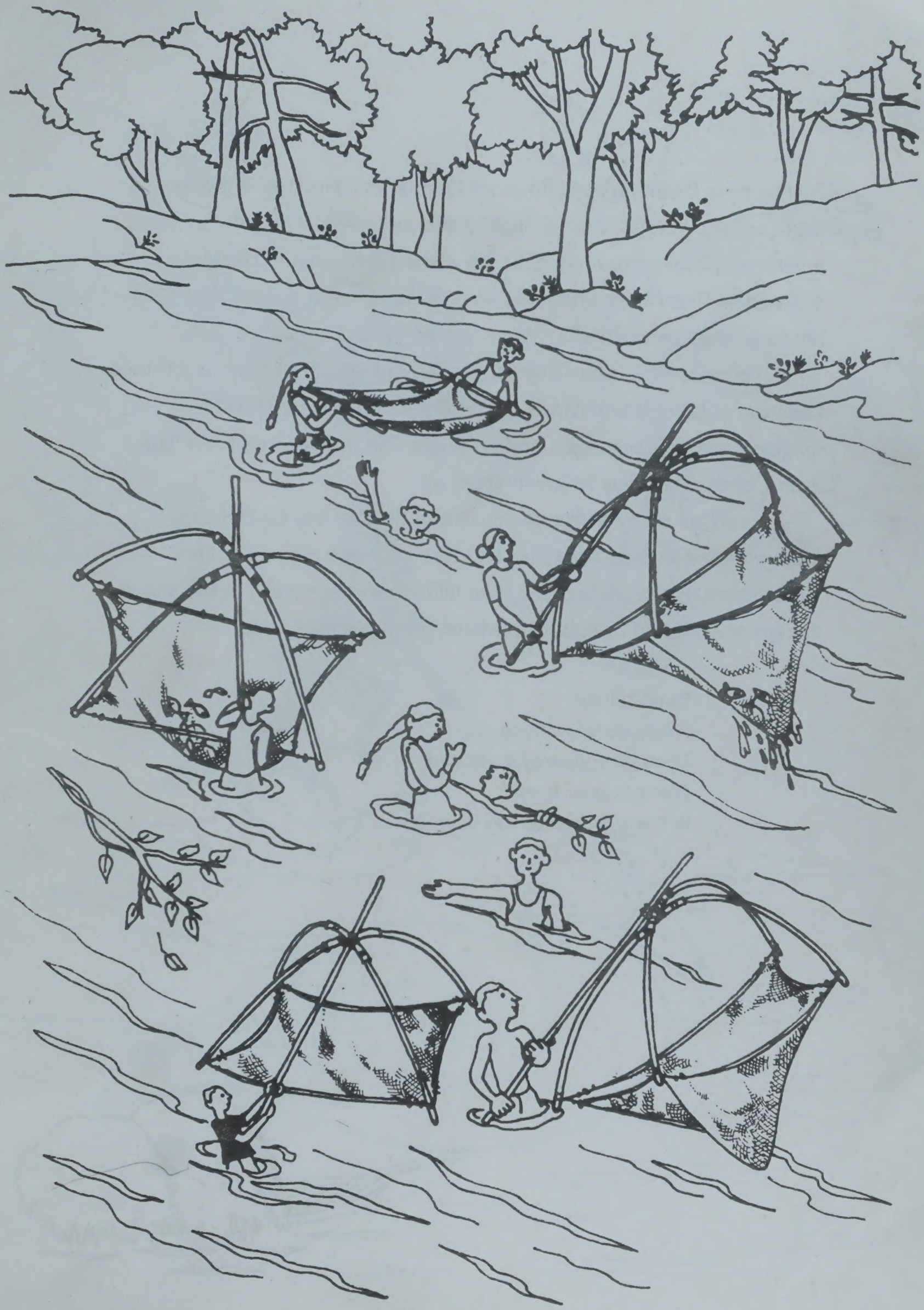
This is the river's delta, the end of its journey, where it breaks up into many little branches to meet the Bay of Bengal. Some of these water canals widen into pools filled with fish, a favourite food of the Bengalis.

Though floods damage Bangladesh, the river also makes the land rich. Plenty of water and fertile soil green the land with fields of paddy, groves of banana and mango and swaying coconut trees.

The waterways brought traders from faraway places. Ships came in with tea from China and spices from the Far East, and took back rice, silk, muslin and jute. Afghans, Portuguese, Dutch, French, Greeks and later the English also came to trade, and some Chinese and Arabs settled here. After many, long years at sea, Ibn Batuta, a traveller from Morocco, first set foot on land here.

Sitting close to the river's banks, the towns of Dhaka and Tangail are famous for their fine, handwoven sarees. But the real 'gold' of Bangladesh is jute, which grows in the wetlands along the river. Early Dutch voyagers used sturdy jute-fibre cloth to wrap the coffee they sent from their Southeast Asian colonies, and soon jute sacks became popular all over the world.

Grey pelican



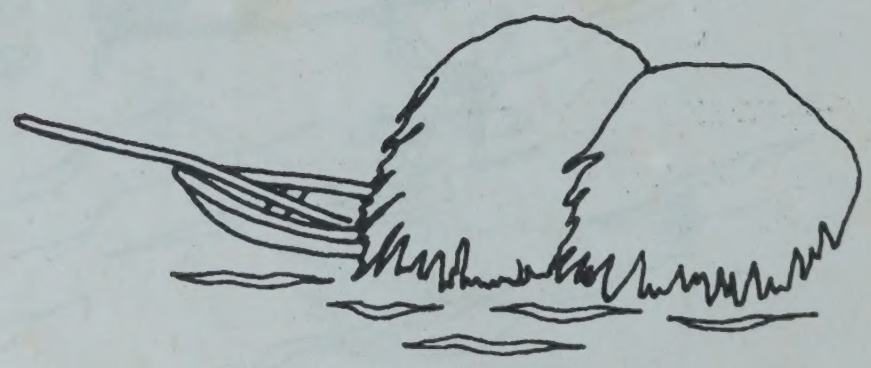
Fishing in the river

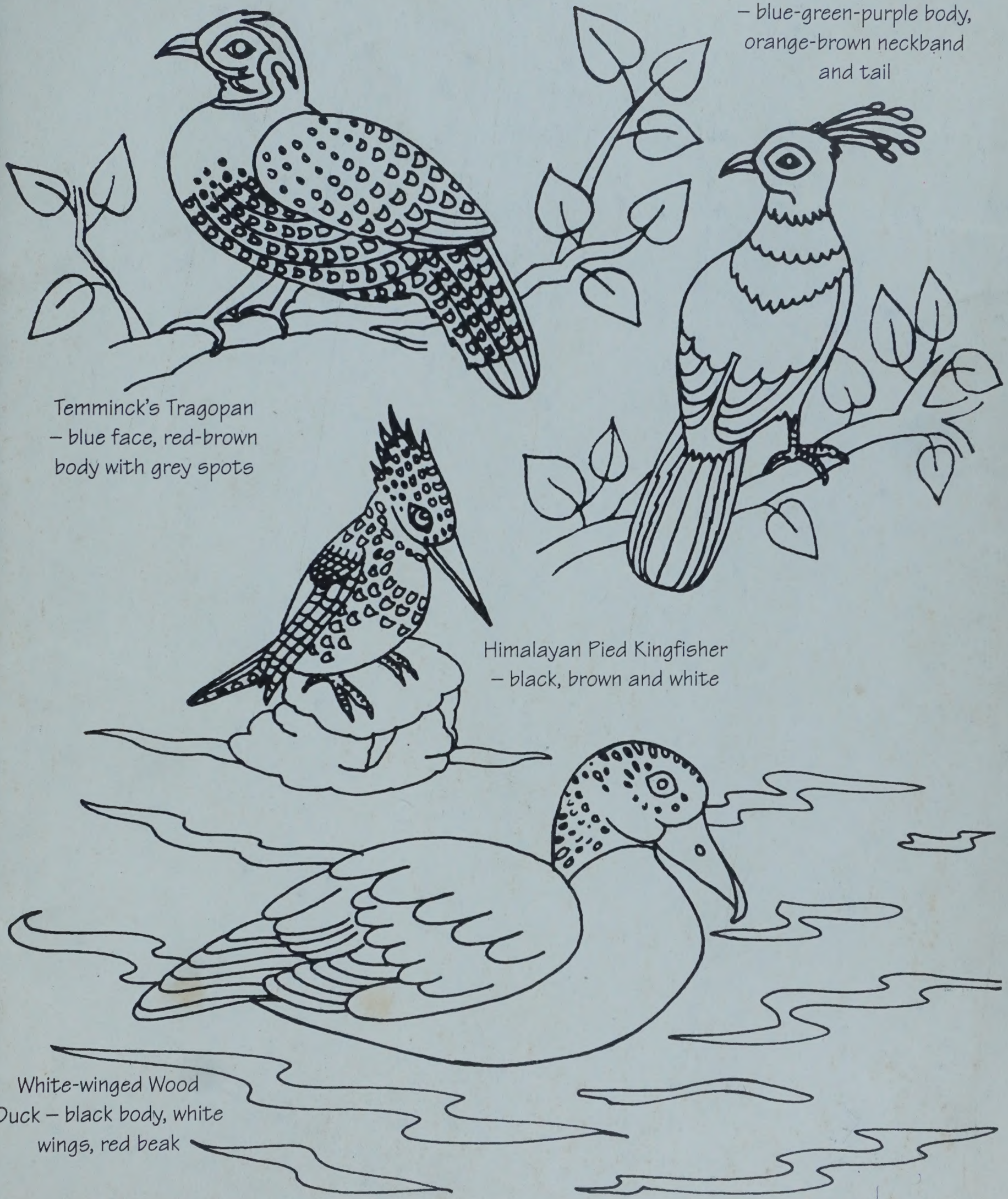
By the time Brahmaputra flows as Padma into the Bay of Bengal, it has changed in nature. Still mighty and awesome, it seems to have quietened down somewhat from its wilder stretches in the icy mountains. The river's changing personality gives a special feel to the lands it flows through and the people who live there.

Perhaps more than any other river in India, Brahmaputra brings together a fascinating range of people, of very different races, religions, beliefs, languages and cultures. The river seems to be the grand, everlasting link between them all.

Just as many streams join it and flow as one to the sea, Brahmaputra weaves together the lives of those high up in the Tibetan mountains, in the forested hills of northeastern India, and in the green plains of Bangladesh where the fishermen sing:

River, tell me
Where do you belong
Does your journey never end
Where is your home
Is there no one to call your own . . .





Monal pheasant
– blue-green-purple body,
orange-brown neckband
and tail

Temminck's Tragopan
– blue face, red-brown
body with grey spots

Himalayan Pied Kingfisher
– black, brown and white

White-winged Wood
Duck – black body, white
wings, red beak

READ AND COLOUR RIVER STORIES

This is the second set in the series, after Read and Colour Freedom Stories. Balancing simple text with detailed line drawings that can be coloured in by the child, the books introduce 7 to 12 year olds to life in and around some of India's important rivers. Older children will be able to read the text themselves. Younger ones may want the stories read aloud. All children, however, will ask questions. Take time to answer these questions and travel with your child on an interactive journey of learning.

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